



Challenges in Translating Humor and Idioms in Cartoons for Young Audiences

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Abstract: This article explores the unique linguistic and cultural challenges of translating humor and idiomatic expressions in animated cartoons intended for young audiences. Humor and idioms are powerful tools for emotional engagement and cultural learning but often resist direct translation due to their context-bound meanings. The article analyzes translation strategies, such as localization and cultural substitution, and emphasizes the need for age-appropriate adaptations that preserve the humor and educational value of the original. The goal is to highlight best practices for translators, educators, and media producers to ensure effective cross-cultural communication through children's animated content.

Keywords: humor, idioms, translation, cartoons, localization, children's media

In the era of globalization, animated cartoons are a powerful medium for entertaining and educating children across cultures. Increasingly, these cartoons are translated into multiple languages to reach global audiences. However, this process is not without obstacles—especially when humor and idiomatic expressions are central to the content. Unlike standard dialogue, idioms and humor are heavily rooted in culture and language-specific nuances, making their translation particularly complex (Zabalbeascoa, 2005).



Cartoons often rely on humor to engage young viewers and maintain their attention. This humor can be verbal (puns, wordplay), situational (slapstick), or cultural (references to local customs). Idioms, similarly, enrich dialogue and help shape a character's personality or cultural background. However, both humor and idioms are deeply embedded in the source language's cultural context, which poses a challenge for translators aiming to make the content accessible and entertaining for children in the target language (Delabastita, 1996). For example, in the cartoon *Peppa Pig*, the idiom "It's raining cats and dogs!" may confuse children in other cultures if translated literally. A translator must find an equivalent expression in the target language that carries the same meaning and tone.

Wordplay and puns are among the most difficult elements to translate because they often depend on homophones, rhymes, or double meanings that do not exist in the target language (Chiaro, 2010). For instance, in English, the joke "Why did the teddy bear say no to dessert? Because he was stuffed!" relies on the double meaning of "stuffed." In Uzbek, there may not be a direct way to preserve both meanings, requiring creative rephrasing or substitution. Additionally, the rhythm and rhyme of songs or poems used in cartoons can be lost in translation unless carefully adapted. This can affect the entertainment value and language-learning potential for young viewers.

Cultural references, idioms, and humor often need to be localized to make sense to the target audience. For example, a reference to Thanksgiving in an American cartoon may be replaced by a more culturally familiar holiday in the translated version. This process, known as localization, is essential to maintaining relevance and engagement for child viewers (Vandaele, 2002). However, improper localization can result in the loss of educational value or misrepresentation of the original context. The challenge lies in striking a balance between preserving the source material's intent and making it understandable and enjoyable for children in another culture.



To address these challenges, translators often use some strategies. One of the primary strategies employed by translators to render humor and idiomatic expressions in cartoons is **adaptation**. For example, the English idiom “It’s raining cats and dogs,” which metaphorically refers to heavy rainfall, has no direct equivalent in Uzbek. A literal translation would likely confuse young viewers, as the imagery of animals falling from the sky is unfamiliar and culturally unrelatable. Therefore, translators often opt for a more culturally and linguistically appropriate alternative such as “Yomg‘ir shaldirab yog‘ayapti.” This adapted expression conveys the same intensity of rainfall in a manner that resonates with the Uzbek-speaking audience, maintaining both clarity and relevance. Another frequently used strategy is **substitution**, which involves replacing an untranslatable or culturally specific element with a more familiar one. In the animated series “SpongeBob SquarePants”, for instance, the line “Don’t be such a Krabby Patty!” plays on a fictional burger’s name to mean “Don’t be grumpy.” Since “Krabby Patty” is not a culturally meaningful reference in Uzbek, a literal translation would fail to communicate the intended tone. A more effective approach is to substitute the phrase with an Uzbek equivalent such as “Bunday jizzaki bo’lma” which conveys the same sentiment in a way that the target audience can easily understand.

In cases where the humor relies on highly language-specific wordplay or cultural references that have no equivalent, translators may resort to **omission**. For example, a pun such as “Lettuce turnip the beet!” relies entirely on phonetic similarities in English and would not be understood by an Uzbek-speaking audience. Attempting to translate such wordplay directly would likely obscure the meaning or disrupt the narrative. In such instances, the translator may choose to omit the line altogether or replace it with unrelated dialogue that better serves the context. When neither adaptation nor substitution is feasible, **paraphrasing** becomes a practical solution. This involves rewriting the original expression in a simpler or more explanatory form. A pun like “Well, that’s just the way the banana peels,” a humorous twist on the idiom “that’s the way the ball bounces,” may be



paraphrased in Uzbek as “Shunaqasi ham bo’lib turadi”. While the original pun and its humor are lost, the paraphrased version retains the intended meaning of reluctant acceptance, thereby ensuring that the core message is preserved for the young audience. These examples underscore the creative and interpretive nature of translating humor and idioms in animated content for children. Rather than relying on literal translations, which often fail to convey the intended effect, skilled translators must evaluate the cultural, linguistic, and cognitive backgrounds of their audience to choose strategies that maintain both the meaning and entertainment value of the original text.

Cartoons can serve as a valuable tool in second language acquisition. However, if humor and idioms are mistranslated or omitted, this potential is diminished. Young viewers may miss opportunities to learn playful language, understand cultural nuances, or develop linguistic flexibility. For language learners, exposure to idiomatic and humorous content can support pragmatic competence and deeper cultural understanding (Krashen, 1982). Thus, translators must be aware of the pedagogical role of cartoons and work closely with educators and producers to create content that is both linguistically rich and developmentally appropriate.

Translating humor and idioms in children's cartoons is a complex task requiring linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, and creativity. As animated media continues to shape young minds globally, the role of skilled translators becomes increasingly important. By employing effective strategies and prioritizing both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness, translators can ensure that children everywhere enjoy and learn from cartoons as much as their native-speaking peers. This contributes not only to language acquisition but also to cross-cultural understanding in a globalized world.



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